

versal coverage, without which you will never slow the rate of cost increase and stop the cost shifting; and a package of comprehensive benefits. I don't want to go through the whole catastrophic insurance fight that Congress had a few years ago. You all remember what happened there.

Beyond that, I'm willing to talk to them about it. But I would just point out that today the questions really should be directed to them: What is your position? We now know that there are another 2.3 million people without insurance, that number of uninsured going up steadily. How do you justify leaving in place a system that costs 40 percent more of our income than any other system in the world and does much less? What is your justification for the status quo? It is the most bureaucratic system that exists anywhere in the world, and it has not worked.

So their rhetoric, you know, I realize you can lob rhetoric that sounds very good, but I don't think that the rhetoric corresponds to the reality of the proposal. The proposal we made leaves in place the choice of doctors, gives more consumer choice to the American people than they have today, and will simplify lives for America's physicians if it passes.

So I would have to say again, I welcome this debate, and it's fine to have a debate over principles on this issue. I want to. I told you what my two were. So when they say that they want to fight us, my question back is, what's your answer to the fact that the number of uninsured Americans is going up every single day? It's going in the wrong direction. Our plan would take it in the right direction.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President's 38th news conference began at 2:10 p.m. in the Briefing Room at the White House.

Remarks on the Resignation of Les Aspin as Secretary of Defense *December 15, 1993*

Ladies and gentlemen, it is with real sadness that today I accept Secretary Aspin's request to be relieved of his duties as Secretary of Defense for personal reasons. I am very

grateful that he's agreed to remain at his post until January 20th, and beyond if necessary, so that we can plan together for the coming year and effect a smooth transition at the Pentagon.

Les has been a close adviser and a friend of mine for a long time. I have valued his wise counsel as a key member of our national security team. And I have told him that after he takes the break he's requested, I very much hope he will consider other assignments for this administration.

During a lifetime of public service in Congress, with our transition, and at the Pentagon, Les Aspin has made invaluable contributions to this Nation's defense and security. None of them have been more significant than his service as Secretary of Defense. Along with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he has provided solid leadership for our uniformed and civilian defense personnel during a period of transition that is historic and has at times been unsettling.

He helped launch creative policy responses to the fundamental changes of this era, from the dissolution of the Soviet empire to the growing challenges of ethnic conflict and weapons proliferation. And through it all, he has led with character, with intelligence, with wisdom, and the unflappable good humor that is both his trademark and his secret weapon.

One of his most important contributions in this past year has been his efforts to help our administration relate our defense strategy in this new era and our defense spending. Under his leadership, the Pentagon conducted the first comprehensive review of our forces since the end of the cold war. This now well-known, bottom-up review has provided our Nation with a profile of this era's threats and a vision of our force structure that will guide our Nation's military for many years to come.

He's provided steady leadership for the entire defense community as it has confronted the inevitable downsizing that accompanied the end of the cold war. He acted on the recommendations of the base closure commission in a way that demonstrated equity, responsibility, and a great concern for

the communities and the families that were hit hard by the closure of our military facilities. And as we've reduced our force levels, he's been the first to voice concerns for the men and women in uniform who shoulder the burden of our national security.

His leadership has also been invaluable in helping our country to adapt to our military social changes. He led the way in our efforts to open the doors for women to serve our Nation in combat roles and helped to ensure more equitable rules toward homosexuals in our military. He's provided creative leadership as he's mobilized the Pentagon to develop new and stronger responses to the many security challenges of this new era, such as his new counterproliferation initiative. And on a range of tough decisions and tough challenges abroad, from Bosnia to Korea, he has called them as he saw them, bringing to bear a lifetime of experience and dedication and a razor-sharp mind to our Nation's security interest.

Above all, Secretary Aspin has provided deep strategic thinking and leadership at a time of profound change in this world. As a result, when our citizens go to bed tonight, we can do so secure in the knowledge that our Nation is building the right forces and acquiring the right capabilities for this new era.

I will always appreciate the thoughtful and dedicated and ultimately selfless service that Les Aspin provided to me and to this Nation over this last year. I asked a lot of him, tough times and tough problems. He gave even more to me, to our military, and to our country than was asked, and I will always be very, very grateful.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:21 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

Letter Accepting the Resignation of Les Aspin as Secretary of Defense

December 15, 1993

Dear Les:

It is with deep sadness that I accept your request that, for personal reasons, you be relieved of your duties after your years of in-

tense, unselfish and extraordinarily effective service to our nation and its security. I am grateful that you are prepared to remain at your post through January 20, or beyond if necessary, as we work through the immediate issues before us and as we manage a smooth transition to your successor.

I hope that after you have taken the break you have requested, you will consider other important assignments that you would find challenging and personally rewarding.

I am proud of your accomplishments over the past year, and you should be, as well. In the Congress, in the campaign and as Secretary of Defense, you have been an effective leader in efforts to harness together our defense strategy and defense resources, culminating in this year's Bottom Up Review. Together with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, you skillfully managed difficult issues—such as the military service of homosexuals and women in combat—that could have proved both deeply divisive and damaging to our military effectiveness and readiness. You helped conduct the first review of our nuclear posture since the end of the Cold War and advanced a new counter proliferation strategy. And you helped in the distinguished appointment of a new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Shalikashvili.

All of this took skill and hard work, and all Americans are in your debt for it.

I look forward to urging you once again to bring your great skills and deep devotion to your country's service.

With admiration,

Bill Clinton

Dear Mr. President,

It has been one year since you asked me to serve as your Secretary of Defense. It has been an honor for me to work with you as we have reshaped our country's military to protect Americans in a vastly changed world.

I am proud of the progress we have made in dealing with these changes. We now have a clear strategic sense of the new dangers we now face. After a year's work we will be able to secure our country against these new dangers with a Bottom Up Force. By strategically defining the strengths we need and hon-